Pharmacists

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SMITHFIELD BRANCH

GOT START AT AGE SIX

Pharmacist Retires At Age 79

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Staff Reporter

SMITHFIELD — As a boy of six, Vance B. Little earned twenty-five cents a week, working as a helper at the Smithfield drugstore — then known as Langhorne, Parish and Simpson.

Some years later, he became the owner with his brother-in-law, E. Arthur Gee Jr. And only this summer — at age 79 — has the well-known pharmacist retired from the business with which he was associated for 73 years.

Little's recollections of the drug store's early years are vivid. A carriage, drawn by horse or mule, used to transport him in his daily rounds of package deliveries to customers. Another of his chores was going to the post office each day. He also was responsible for keeping an adequate ice supply on hand.

Each morning, he put a peanut bag under his knees to scrub the pharmacy's floors throughout. "Drinking water wasn't good in Smithfield in those days," Little advised. "The store used to get half gallon bottles of Buffalo Lithia Water from Norfolk," he said. "I was too little to lift the bottles off the wagon, so they would set me down first, then hand me the bottles to deliver to each house."

By the time he was seven and a half, he was entrusted with other duties. Sundays, he went to the drugstore directly from church to open the store, and begin a routine round of telephone calls to all the rich people in town. "I would find out how many people wanted ice cream," he said. "Poor people couldn't afford it." After receipt of the orders, he would dip the ice cream up and deliver it.

Excepting emergencies, he said, "I never missed church for anything. "I won every pin they ever gave for anything," he added. He holds membership in Trinity United Methodist Church.

Little took bills to the pharmacy's customers every Monday.

The youthful entrepreneur had several other regular money-making ventures. "It was root, pig or die, in those days," he recalls. An "old maid school teacher" enlisted his services for milk deliveries. "She had a cow," he said, "and she packaged the milk from it in pint paper cartons with wire handles. She gave me a penny for every customer I got for her. And then I would deliver the milk."

An additional enterprise was carrying notes for some of the town's prominent men to the girls they wanted to date. In each instance, he was adjured to bring back a yes or no answer. "I got five, ten — at the most, 25 cents a piece for this job," he said. "Every one of those men married the girls I took the notes to," he laughed.

His bright eyes lit up with the advice, "everybody made a pet of me." One Christmas, while he was working at Chapman and Sykes Dry Goods Store, different people asked him to hang up a stocking at various points around the town, so they could put something in them for him. "I hung up six stockings that Christmas, and got anywhere from a quarter to a dollar in each," he said.

Little was making fifteen dollars a month in 1917, when he left the Smithfield store to go to Falconer's Pharmacy in Newport News. He got forty dollars a month at Falconer's. He was around 19 at the time, he said, and rode to work on a bicycle from his sister's home in the Boulevard section of Newport News, where he lived.

"I had to go over the 25th Street bridge, and ride through the worst part of town," he said. "I was scared to death."

In 1921, he went to Atlanta, Ga., where he became a registered pharmacist. He made the same salary when he came back, that he'd gotten before, he said. After 16 years, he left Falconer's and went to work for a chain of stores — Day's Inc. — where he served as manager for 11 years.

In 1943, Little returned to Smithfield. He and his brother-in-law, Gee, bought the drug store which was operating then as Parish and Co. They formed the partnership known as Little's Pharmacy. The firm was incorporated in 1964, Mrs. Gee becoming the third member of the corporation. Mrs. Gee, who was the former Miss Adelaide Little, and sister of Little, has served as bookkeeper of the firm since its beginning. She became secretary of the corporation in 1964, as well as its bookkeeper. The corporation still holds the building occupied by the pharmacy, and it was leased to its new tenants for a period of several years.

During the Littles' management, the store retained an atmosphere unique to drugstores throughout the South in the early part of this century. Bentwood and curved wire chairs then were familiar sights to town residents who

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Mrs. Delma L. Ely and her brother, Vance B. Little, stand in the yard of their home, "Holly Hill," Smithfield.